

Pioneer celebration of an ancient tradition

The first Christmas in Salt Lake Valley was celebrated on a Sunday, the day after Christmas in 1847. The Saturday that Christmas fell on was a mild day — a work



Utah Places

by Craig Witham

day the pioneers could not afford to spend celebrating. The men spent the day clearing sage, plowing, and hunting. The next day a meeting was held around the flagpole in "Old Fort." A pioneer woman who participated wrote, "We sang praises to God; we all joined in the opening prayer and the speaking that day will always be remembered. They were words of thanksgiving and cheer. . . . Some wept with joy. The children played in the enclosure, and around a sage brush fire that night, we gathered and sang 'Come Come Ye Saints, No Toil Nor Labor Fear, But With Joy Wend Your Way.'" There were no presents, no tree, and no Yule log. The Christmas dinner consisted of "boiled rabbit and a little bread," but all were filled.

A much earlier Utah Christmas was celebrated on the banks of the Weber River, where Ogden now sits. Fur trader Osborne Russell sat down to feast with a French trapper and his Flathead Indian (so named because they didn't mutilate their skulls, forming their foreheads to points like their other Indian neighbors) wife, and an assortment of Nez Perce, Cree, Iowa, Flathead, and Snake Indians. The main entree was two huge platters heaped with stewed elk and boiled deer. Side dishes were boiled flour pudding, garnished with dried fruits and berry syrup, cakes, and six gallons of strong sweetened coffee. After the feast, the pipes were passed. The rest of the day the men spent in target practice, while the women and children cleaned up and were allowed to scavenge what they could from their men-folk's tree-bark plates.

There were no Christmas trees, and no presents at these and several subsequent pioneer Christmas celebrations. But when they got settled and began to prosper, the

pioneers were the most ardent of celebrants, dancing the night away Christmas Eve and feasting and exchanging gifts Christmas Day. Brigham Young had a large packet of clothes, goodies, and toys, and a Christmas tree delivered to each of his families, but he wouldn't allow candles on the trees because of the fire hazard.

Long, long before anyone knew Utah existed, they didn't have any trees, either. Before the year A.D. 320, they didn't even have any Christmas. Around that time, the Catholic Fathers in Rome decided to turn the pagan "Birthday of the unconquered sun," into the "Birthday of the unconquered Son." Replacing pagan ritual with Christian meaning turned out to be so much easier than vainly trying to eradicate the ritual that the idea was carried on through many centuries and many cultures, culminating in the potpourri of tradition we now call Christmas. One legend has it that the first Christmas tree was a fir decorated by Martin Luther with candles to signify "the starry skies of Bethlehem that holy night." But the practice of using evergreens for end-of-summer fertility celebrations, feasts and orgies dates back

much further than Martin Luther. The tree has been special for a long time. In medieval times, in the Christian "mystery plays," the Garden of Eden was always represented by a fir tree hung with apples. This undoubtedly had some influence on its being chosen to accompany Christ's birth. The hanging of apples can still be seen in our tradition of hanging glass bulbs (the favorite color, red) on our Christmas trees.

Mistletoe was very important in ancient druidic rites. The mistletoe (which was thought to magically appear when lightning struck near a tree) was cut from its host oak tree, symbolically killing the old year to make room for the new year to reign. Holly was an ancient symbol of fertility that became associated with Christ through a legend that accuses the plant of having been used for Christ's crown of thorns. For this, the former-

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ly white berries were permanently stained red as punishment to the plant, and as a reminder of Jesus' blood sacrifice.

If any of this should be distressing, just remember that a symbol's present meaning is the only real one. Even though evergreen, for example, was once a symbol of fertility associated with drunken, orgiastic rites, the real meaning for us can, and should remain, the everlasting life that the birth of the Saviour brought to humankind. So, have a Merry Christmas and enjoy the fulness only a rich tradition can bring! □